

mass media

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A Note on Kalam's Idea of Media

Abhay Kumar*

In course of writing a piece on the life and contribution of the former President of India A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, who died of cardiac arrest in Shillong on July 27, 2015, I came across his writings and speeches on media. I found his views mostly scattered in his well-known book *India 2020* and two-volume *Selected Writings*. Kalam, who used to distribute the morning newspaper *Dinamani* to households in Rameswaram during his school days, said that media should adopt a "positive" attitude in covering events.

Kalam, therefore, asked media to document positive news on a daily basis: 'it is time now that the media attempts a more positive outlook, reporting at least one positive event a day!'¹

In his writings, Kalam did not clearly define what he meant by being "positive" but it is not difficult to discern his real purpose behind such an appeal. One should bear in mind that the call to become positive is often a call to conform to the norms and maintain the status quo.

Irrespective of whether Kalam made such an appeal or not, media, which are funded by big corporate houses, are little interested in throwing spotlight on the dark side of society. Guided by their main concern to earn profits, they are compelled to report "negative" incidents only when they are not able to suppress them. Their compulsion lies in the fact that the majority of people in society are exploited and humiliated on the basis of caste, class, gender and religion etc., and it is not possible for media to put these realities under the carpet for long.

Furthermore, Kalam said that the

media should celebrate 'every aspect of the success of the nation, from any part of the country.'² On the lines of Kalam's advice, state-run Doordarshan has recently launched a programme, *Good News India*, which focuses on positive news.

It is ironical that the Kalam and his likes, who do not get tired of praising the "virtues" of bourgeoisie-democracy for ensuring freedom of press and having "critical" and "free" media, often prescribe to media to desist from bringing to public notice negative (read critical) stories.

Similarly, Kalam asked cinema to make movies based on success stories of development. Addressing the annual National Film Awards Function in 2003, Kalam exhorted film makers to 'celebrate the success of our innovative developmental schemes in agriculture, education, healthcare, infrastructure and the dedicated work of our youngsters, so that it can reach the billion people and they will become partners in the development.'³

Kalam's emphasis on covering stories about agriculture, education and health is justified as the Indian media, particularly electronic media, often ignore substantive issues. For example, the so-called 24X7 national news channels spend hours on trivial issues such as Modi's fancy suit and bickering among Kejriwal and his opponents, while they have little enthusiasm to focus on bigger issues.

But even the apparent concern of Kalam for substantive issues is bereft of substantive contents. For example, his solution to all problems of society is the neoliberal-model of

development. To fulfill this agenda, he asked media to assume the role of an active partner in national development.

Besides, Kalam also urged media to promote national integration so as to make a "stronger" and "better" India. Thus, he said: '...let us also renew our commitment to use the powerful tool of cinema to strengthen the national resolve to take India further on the path of national integration and development.'⁴

While he strongly made a case for national integration, he overlooked the pitfall of this process; the process of making any nation-state is mired in untold violence and massacre. A large section of the Indian media is quite nationalist and some of them even jingoist.

For examples, the reporting, by most Indian media on Kashmir or on the arrest of Muslims on terror charges, often violates the ethics of journalism, which expects media to work as the watchdog rather than an apparatus of the state.

Further, Kalam wished media to build up an "enlightened" society by inculcating moral values in citizens. He, thus, encouraged media to aim at 'promoting an enlightened society, which means education with value system, transforming religion into a spiritual force and building economic prosperity to every nation based on its core competence.'⁵

One could note here how the moral values, which Kalam supported, are geared towards making citizens suitable to the requirements of the market. Social theorists have shown that to sustain any system, such as the neoliberal

one, people have to internalise particular values. Likewise, by emphasising the need to transform individuals, Kalam wanted media to tailor them to the need of capital.

Besides, Kalam made a passing reference to the women question by asking media to 'bring honour to the womanhood.' However, he did not mention anywhere why women are dishonored every day.⁶

As it has become clear, Kalam's views on media are framed within the logic of the capital and the state. Since his main concern is to use media as a state apparatus, he completely ignored a large number of fundamental issues. While media continue to manufacture consent in collusion with state and capital, it is largely monopolised by male, upper castes and classes, these critical issues deliberately find no space in Kalam's views. ■

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Endnote:

1. A.P.J Abdul Kalam with Y.S. Rajan: *India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium*, Viking, New Delhi, 1998, p. 293.

2. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, *Selected Speeches*, Vol. II, edited by Smita Vats Sharma, Dayawanti Srivastava, Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, New-Delhi, 2010, p. 624.

3. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, *Selected Speeches*, Vol. I, edited by Smita Vats Sharma, Dayawanti Srivastava, Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 2007, p. 567.

4. *Selected Speeches*, 2007, p. 570.

5. *Selected Speeches*, 2010, p. 624.

6. Ibid.

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